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ZNR UUUUU ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY ANKARA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5180
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RUEUITH/ODC ANKARA TU
INFO RUEHTH/AMEMBASSY ATHENS 8671
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 3859
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JCS PASS J-5/CDR S. WRIGHT

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: ANKARA MEDIA REACTION REPORT

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 2008

In Today's Papers

EU Joins Headscarf Debates in Turkey

All papers report that yesterday, Prime Minister Erdogan denounced criticisms from the Inter-University Council of university rectors and the Turkish Union of Bar Associations against AKP-MHP's proposals for turban reforms. Erdogan said the two institutions did not represent all academics and lawyers in Turkey. "The parliament is the only authority that can speak on behalf of the Turkish people," Erdogan emphasized.

On Thursday, 10,000 people rallied in the Aegean port city of Izmir to protest against headscarf reforms. Representatives of 76 NGOs will stage an "Independence and Secularism" rally on Saturday in Ankara when parliament holds the second round of voting on constitutional changes to headscarf laws.

The Turkish Union of Chambers (TOBB) president Rifat Hisarciklioglu joined the turban debates by criticizing efforts to discuss clothing in the constitution. "The constitution is not a fashion magazine. Politicians should work toward social compromise on the matter," Hisarciklioglu said.

Papers report European Union Expansion Commissioner Olli Rehn's office said the EU has "never asked Turkey to make any headscarf reforms." Mainstream Milliyet says this statement came in response to Foreign Minister Babacan's attempts to link the headscarf debate to the EU entry bid. Marc Pierini, the Head of the Delegation of the European Commission to Turkey, urged the Turkish government to also consider the rights of those who do not wear the headscarf. Leftist-nationalist Cumhuriyet reports the European Parliament official reporting on Turkey's accession, Ria Oomen-Ruijten, has expressed concern that women in Turkey would be put under religious pressure to wear the headscarf if the ban is removed. Liberal Radikal says on its front page the Constitutional Court decision on the headscarf reforms will be a difficult challenge because it will change the direction of Turkey's future.

Editorial Commentary on Turban Debates

Mehmet Tezkan wrote in mainstream Vatan (2/8): "This week's debates are enough to prove the turban is a political symbol. If this was not true, the debates would not have conjured up controversies surrounding secularism and democracy. The turban was a symbol in the past as well. But the reason for today's political polarization in Turkey is that the turban has become the flag of a political party. People re-opened old wounds and turban debates intensified. What caused all this? The AKP was not successful in being persuasive and establishing trust among people. People believe the AKP is gradually returning to its previous Islamist policies. This belief makes people turn to the streets and attracts harsh criticism from the judiciary. In other words, the high judiciary is adding to the fears Turkey will become like Iran. Despite all the guarantees given by PM Erdogan regarding the protection of secularism, people are increasingly skeptical about AKP policies. Thus, AKP members' past policies are causing deep secularism debates."

Yilmaz Oztuna commented in conservative-nationalist Turkiye (2/8): "For years, I argued in my columns that Turkey's most important national issue is its accession to the European Union. Recently, it has become difficult to understand our position regarding EU reforms. It is obvious that only the 'turban issue' is on Turkey's agenda at the moment. Unfortunately, the EU and the struggle against terrorism no longer have a place on the agenda. Turkey's turban polarization has become more defined and the debates are harsher than ever. I am concerned that this polarization will turn into a permanent national characteristic. The solution lies with implementing turban freedom in the universities with calmness. We should end this debate now. Otherwise, Turkey, under these conditions, will fail to reach the level of other contemporary civilizations."

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New High Court Chief Criticizes Turban Reforms

All papers report the new Court of Appeals Chairman Hasan Gerceker told a gathering of judiciary members in a ceremony before he assumed office Thursday that the question of freeing the turban in universities was "not simply a turban issue." "It's not possible for the country to go back to a system filled with superstitions," Gerceker said, stressing that judges had "the authority and responsibility to point out wrongdoings." He noted the parliament had the power to carry out constitutional and legal reforms, but stressed that this authority cannot be used to "weaken secularism." Gerceker also said the court would make a statement about the turban initiatives soon.

Erdogan Visits the Site of the Ludwigshafen Fire

All papers report Prime Minister Erdogan called for calm on Thursday when he visited the site of a fire in Ludwigshafen in western Germany, which killed nine Turks and heightened community tensions. Erdogan was greeted by Turks who carried signs that read "Yesterday it was Jews, now it is Turks." "The pain of Ludwigshafen should pave the way for peace," Erdogan said in front of the burnt-out building, "Let us all help to strengthen the friendship between Germany and Turkey." He urged the Turkish press to stop fuelling tensions. Meanwhile, the German Ambassador to Turkey Eckhard Cuntz asked the Turkish press not to exploit the racial issue. "The investigation in Ludwigshafen continues; no conclusions have been made that racists started the fire," Cuntz told the Islamist-oriented Zaman.

The cause of the February 3 blaze in an apartment block in Ludwigshafen remains unclear but speculation in the local Turkish community and in Turkish media claim it was a racially motivated arson attack. A Turkish team has traveled to Germany to assist in the investigation.

Taraf: Turkey Holds 'Secret' Talks with PKK

Leftist Taraf says on page one that Ankara has established contact with the PKK indirectly while carrying out diplomacy with northern Iraqi Kurdish leaders. According to leftist Taraf, "In 2008, the Turkish government plans an 'official opening' to northern Iraq with a three-stage plan in which the Iraqi President Talabani will be

invited to Turkey, a Turkish consulate will be opened in Erbil, and the federal Kurdish administration in northern Iraq will be recognized. In talks with Kurdish leaders, Turkey discussed amnesty for PKK members who have not joined armed action, and sending the organization's leaders to third countries. The Turkish military is not opposed to a 'political solution' by the AKP government and the Turkish intelligence service MIT. The Turkish military operations into northern Iraq, however, suspended the talks and delayed attempts to reach a solution."

Belgium Frees Dev-Sol Leaders

Hurriyet, Milliyet, Sabah, Radikal, Taraf, Cumhuriyet, Zaman and others report a Belgian court acquitted the leaders of the far left DHKP-C (Dev-Sol) Thursday. The court did not take into account attacks outside Belgium and rejected calls to describe the group as a terrorist organization. The court in Anvers acquitted the organization's leader Dursun Karatas, as well as other top members Zerrin Sari, Sukriye Akar and Bahar Kimyongur. Fehriye Erdal, Musa Asoglu and Kaya Saz were sentenced to suspended prison terms from 21 months to 6 years. One of the acquitted suspects was Fehriye Erdal, who is wanted by Turkish law enforcement for the assassination of Ozdemir Sabanci, a renowned Turkish businessman.

TV News:

NTV

Domestic News

- The trial of the murderers of Armenian Turkish journalist Hrant

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Dink will resume February 11.

- US Ambassador to Turkey Ross Wilson said Thursday in Hatay that "the US would never provide arms for the PKK or other terror organizations." Wilson also said the US is not taking sides in the ongoing headscarf debate in Turkey.

- Two cars in Istanbul have been set on fire by unknown attackers.

International News

- Admiral Mike Mullen, the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Wednesday Turkey and US cooperation against the PKK in recent months was "remarkable."

- Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak is to pay an official visit to Turkey on February 12-13 to meet with President Abdullah Gul, Prime Minister Erdogan, the Defense Minister, and the military Chief of Staff.

- Secretary Rice and British Foreign Secretary David Miliband paid a surprise visit to Kabul where they called on NATO allies to provide more troops to Afghanistan.

WILSON